When I told my uncle I was off to spend a few days with a friend, he was disappointingly unperturbed. Perhaps he had dreaded my cooking. Had he known that the old windmill had a farouche reputation, he would certainly have believed it his duty to object. But, becalmed in his Government office, he knew little of the outside world. Which is perhaps why he was a Peeping Tom. Even if I had known the ancient building’s ill fame I would simply have thought the whole thing romantically Bohemian.

As I flew joyfully through the drizzle, seeing the mill rearing blackly against the steaming sky, thinking of it as a tower of Trebizond, or Rapunzel’s prison, God knows what other fancy metaphors, it never entered my head that Eve mightn’t welcome me, or might even be away. Not for a moment had I dreamed that she was married, had a child, and led a starveling existence across the Harbor. Indeed, she had never lived in the windmill, but in one of the ramshackle buildings that cluttered the Partington estate. Dearly wanting a poet to live in a windmill, I had misunderstood her reference.

The mill wasn’t like anything in literature; it resembled nothing so much as prodigious bottle tree, bulging at the base, tapering to two or three scraggy branches. These were the ruined sails , two, not four, for the mill had been burned before our family came to Auckland. It was mighty, archaic, its architecture belonging to an older world. High on its bony ridge, people said that once it had collected every wind that blew. There was, indeed, a ghostly croak and flutter from the sails, hanging down in splinters and gobbets from the forever-frozen cap. More than a hundred years of colonial history stood there before me, and all in darkness.

Heavy rain began to fall. Baffled, completely at a loss what to do, but above all dead set against trailing home again to a lone evening with my uncle, I saw at last a faint light high in the fortress wall. It shone through one of the irregularly placed apertures or windows. Single-mindedly, I knew it must belong to my friend, working at a poem by candlelight.

Stumbling over streaming cobbles, intermittently illuminated by a blinking advertisement on the roof of a nearby furniture shop, I looked for a way in. There was a tall locked door, and a chained wicket, nothing else. Round and round I went, increasingly bewildered. All around the foot of the -mill was confusion and disarray – boxes and stove-in barrels, piles of rotting flour bags, a broken cart with its arms up in the air, and what appeared to be abandoned buildings, sheds, a storehouse, cottages. In one of these a party was going on; there sounded drunken laughter and frequent shrieks. The smell of this deserted place was complicated and overlaid by time - mould, dirt, decayed wood, and fermented grain.

At last I noticed, far above, a spidery catwalk reached by a rickety ladder. In this unorthodox way I entered the mill, uneasy and indecisive, longing to run away home but fearing what I might find there. I found myself in a strange chamber, a machine room full of mysterious gears, with a monstrous shaft going straight up through the ceiling. In the discontinuous light from the street, I looked down on millstones, enormous, prehistoric, powdered palely with husks of wheat.

The mill was dank, cold and Gothic, and my admiration for my friend Eve increased as I climbed tortuously upward. What dedication, what endurance, to live in this place and write, write - would I have the same strength of will and spirit? At last I came to that light I had seen from below, a gaslight like the two or three that had half-illuminated the climb upwards. Its soft, faintly fluttering glow showed me a queer cubby shaped like a serving of pie, the outer boundary being the sweeping curve of the mill’s wall. I saw a table littered with ledgers, invoices and dirty plates, a camp bed sticking out from behind a screen, and a woman fastening her suspenders. Her mouth was two straight scratches of scarlet lipstick, open in consternation.

‘Where the hell did you come from? I thought I’d locked the door.’

Not enlightening her as to my means of entrance, I asked about Eve.

She’d heard of Eve Langley, yes, she had, but not for years. Eve’s young man, called himself an artist, had a studio on top of the old storehouse, next door to the mill, and Eve had lived with him there. Donkey’s years ago, really. What had happened to that weird girl?

‘Here, I’m just going to have a cup of tea. Sit down and have one. Get off that coat for goodness sake, you’re drenched.’

Muriel, her name was. Call me Mew, everyone does. She did a bit of bookkeeping for the miller in exchange for this birds’ nest of a room. Once quite a few people dossed down in the mill, and they had great old times, but the old codger was a bit crotchety now and took umbrage at all kinds of things.

Mew was skinny and a bit forlorn, getting along in her thirties and not liking it. She had the gaunt jumpy look of a chain-smoking woman, goitrous eyes and a sisterly comprehension of my problem.

‘Like that, is he? Gawd, what can you do with them?’

She was about to leave for the party down in the cottage, the rowdy one, but as I got up to go, she objected.

‘Not out in that! It’s raining cats and dogs. Here, stay the night. I won’t be back till breakfast time. Then you can go to work or home or whatever you like. Come on, dear, have some common. You’ll drown out there. And you *were* planning on staying over with that Eve.’

I suppose I thought it would be offensive to refuse her kind hospitality. I did peep out after she’d gone, but she’d turned out all the lights as she went, and I feared blundering downstairs looking for the way out. Without undressing I lay on top of Mew’s bed and tried to convince myself how pleased I’d be some day to know I’d actually spent a night in the old windmill.

In fact, I wasn’t, and never have been since. With a fearful start I awakened to find a stranger in an advanced state of nakedness hauling at my clothes and swearing. Another man stood by, swaying and grinning. With one arm he shook a head-lolling Mew back and forth like a dead duck. Over the shoulder of my attacker I saw her tossed into a corner, where she sat shrieking feebly like a stood-on kitten.

‘I forgot about her! I forgot about her!’

There was no time for thought; we rolled off the bed, and as we thumped on the floor I brought my momentarily freed knee up between his legs and simultaneously drove my finger savagely into his eye. This was both luck and instinct. Actually, when I saw that bloodshot eye so close to my face I wanted to do something much more primitive.

It was probably a brief and disorderly brawl, fraught with terror on my part and drunken incapacity on the others’. The first man retched and bellowed, between spasms whining piteously, ‘She’s knackered me!’

‘I’ll fix her for you, Len,’ promised the other, grabbing me by the hair. We reeled about the room, severely impeded by Mew’s attachment to my assailant’s leg. She may have been paralytic drunk, but she had a grip like a bulldog.

‘Run! Run!’ she squawked, as though that were not my main intention in life. He dragged her about the room, raining blows on her and me indiscriminately, until at last I fell backwards through the door to the dark landing. I cannoned down the first flight of stairs, not seeing one and touching few. Len’s friend crashed after me. He hit something, a post or baluster, and let out a roar. The next flight I saw dimly in the swift light of a passing car, fled down them in mad terror, gulping for air. But now I had the hang of them, keeping one hand on the circular wall, where the treads were broadest, though God knows they were more like a companionway than stairs. Len’s friend fell like a load bricks. He may well have broken a bone, for he lay there groaning. Now there was no more pursuit; I scurried downwards until I came to the machine room, its darkness made darker by formless metal hulks, its air thick with the smells of meal and mildew.

Once outside, I wandered aimlessly, looking for shelter from the bucketing rain, huddling in the lee of walls, even for a while under the wrecked cart. In my state of shock it did not occur to me to go home. It seemed to be early morning. The street light were out, there was no sound of traffic. Only the rain sloshed along the cobbles. After a while I found a loose board in the wall of the dormered building Mew had called the storehouse. It was a cavernous, mousy-smelling barn, full of rusty derelict machinery. In the mill’s prime years it had been a biscuit factory. Crouching behind one of these machines, I mumbled and moaned to myself like a dog that has been in a fight and is not yet over the fear and frenzy. Hurting almost everywhere, I was most conscious of anger of a ferocious kind. Not only could I have killed Mew’s friends, I could have killed my uncle for indirectly causing my pain and horror. Far away, a clock struck four. I decided to leave my refuge as soon as it became light, go to the *Star* and tidy myself up. It was Saturday, but we worked on Saturday, so I would work. This was not stoicism, but an unconscious desire to restore my normal routine as soon as possible.

So I waited, half-drowsing, listening go the rats running races over the floor of the loft above, where Eve’s lover and later husband once had his studio and was happy.

As I hurried down back streets towards the *Star* office keeping my head down against the rain, only one person stopped to gape at me.

‘My dear,’ cried this woman. ‘What has happened? Have you been in an accident?’

‘A motorbike knocked me over,’ I gabbled. ‘Going to the doctor right now.’

When in the *Star’s* washroom I examined my body, I decided I could very well have collided with a motorbike or even a car. I was black, green and yellow almost everywhere. My scalp felt as though it were semi-detached from my skull; I had a thick lip and the beginning of a swollen nose. Bitter hate filled me when I saw my bodily damage; if I had known a murderous spell to put on those two men I would have done so.

I stuck with the motorbike story, except to Jan, the reporter, who happened to be the first person I met as I emerged from the washroom. He was returning from meeting one of the Matson Line’s tourist vessels; it was the custom for newsmen to be sent to meet these ships, scan the passenger list, and interview any important people on board before the ship berthed. There was something so sweet about his furrowed golden brows, his fair face flushed with concern, that I wept for the first time. He took me into the fileroom, where I choked out my story and dropped tears on his shirt. He said he understood my horror very well because once, on a late assignment, he had been jumped by two muggers who took all his clothes as well as money.

‘Can you imagine?’ he asked, scarlet at the memory. ‘Starkers! Or pretty near! At eleven at night. I had to lurk until the cop came along on his beat, and he lent me his raincoat… it was unforgettably horrible!’

Remembering then that he had copy to deliver, he straightened up, said firmly, ‘You need someone to look after you, and I’ll do it.’

In fact, it was Mr Ridling who looked after me. Taking one look at my dishevelment, falling without question for the motorbike story, he said, ‘You’re going home.’ Calling a taxi, he eased me into it, for by then I was really in pain, and ordered me to call a doctor or there’d be trouble from him. Though naturally I did not do as he said, I was deeply grateful for his practical aid.

Still, young men are young men and girls will always think them wonderful. My bizarre experience in the mill was the beginning of a delightful romance with the kind and charming Jan, who had so few years left to live.